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Intelligence Memorandum

Northeast Thailand

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Northeast Thailand

Insurgency in parts of northeast Thailand—the Khorat Plateau—is the most recent development in a long history of political disaffection between the people of the northeast and the central government in Bangkok. Communist exploitation of this disaffection was attempted as early as the late 1920's, when branches of the Vietnamese Communist Party were established in the towns of Nong Khai and Khon Kaen. Since then subversive activity has waxed and waned and has been repressed repeatedly by the central government. Armed insurgency increased markedly in late 1964 and early 1965, after two Chinese Communist-oriented Thai front groups—the "Thailand Independence Movement" (TIM) and the "Thailand Patriotic Front" (TPF)—were formed in Peking. Thai insurgents are being indoctrinated in Communist China and trained in North Vietnam.

Three factors have traditionally fostered the development of dissidence in northeast Thailand: 1) the physical isolation of the region from the remainder of Thailand in contrast to its relatively easy accessibility to Laos, 2) the failure of much of the population to identify with the central government in Bangkok, and 3) the relative poverty of a rural population living in a precarious agricultural environment. The Thai Government is devoting increased attention and resources to the task of counteracting these problems.

Location and Transportation

Northeast Thailand covers some 70,000 square miles and comprises about one-third of the entire national area. About 10 million people, one-third of the total population of the country, live here. The region is strategically located relative to Indochina. Imports to Laos from overseas move through the port of Bangkok and across northeast Thailand to their destination. In the present conflict the area serves as a logistical base and as an "aerial back door" for planes flying to Vietnam. Dry and wet season route capacities and the location of selected airfields are shown on Map 56654.

The region is a plateau physically separated from Bangkok and the rest of the nation by a mountainous escarpment consisting of the north-south trending Thiu Khao (mountain range) Phetchabun and the east-west aligned Thiu Khao Phanom Dongrak. At the right-angle junction of the two ranges, some 75 miles northeast of Bangkok, the elevation is over 4,000 feet; the average elevation throughout the mountains is about 2,000 feet. These mountains are formidable obstacles to surface movement either from the lowlands of central Thailand or from locations in southeast Thailand, such as the port area of Sattahip. Villages on the plateau also are largely isolated from one another. Although the monotonous, almost flat surface offers few physical obstacles to road-building other than streams which must be bridged, many of the estimated 15,000 villages are connected to one another or to distant roads only by oxcart tracks that may become almost impassable in the rainy season.

The Thai Government has taken important steps to breach the isolation of the plateau. In 1958 it completed the Friendship Highway from Sara Buri in the central valley to Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) and subsequently it extended the road northward to Nong Khai. The eventual completion and improvement of the road system from the strategically important Sattahip-U Taphao (the new B-52 airfield) complex to Nakhon Ratchasima, as well as the construction of two roads into the northwestern part of the plateau (the roads from Lom Sak in the central lowlands to Chum Phae and Loei, respectively), will also help tie the plateau to the lowlands. Under the Thai 7-year highway development plan, 1965-71, a new first-class highway will replace the road from Udon Thani (Udorn) via Sakon Nakhon to the province (*changwat*) of Nakhon Phanom; a road will also be constructed along the Mekong border area from Nong Khai to the province capital at Nakhon Phanom. Both of these roads are under construction. A new road will connect Nakhon Ratchasima with Ubon Ratchathani (Ubon or Ubol) and the present road between Roi Et and Ubon Ratchathani will be improved to make it an all-weather, first-class highway. Many secondary roads connecting isolated villages in security-sensitive provinces are being planned and constructed under accelerated programs.

Rail and air transport facilities are also being improved. The rail line from Bangkok bifurcates at Nakhon Ratchasima and extends northward to Nong Khai and eastward to Warin Chamrap, the rail station for Ubon Ratchathani. Civil airlines link Bangkok with most major towns on the plateau.

Population

Cultural differences and, frequently, very parochial loyalties, in addition to the physical isolation of the area, seem to be paramount in the failure of the plateau population to identify with the central government. The environment of central Thailand, particularly that around the great urban center of Bangkok, comes as a cultural shock to the many peasants from the northeast seeking temporary work in the city. Bangkokians look down upon the northeasterner as a rustic bumpkin who cannot even speak "proper" Thai; he therefore finds it difficult to identify with them. In contrast, the peasant who seeks temporary work in Laos encounters a culture, society, and language much like those of his home community. Thus in some ways his identification is easier with the Lao than with the central Thai. This cultural affinity has led to some ill-organized separatist movements in the past and to the fear in Bangkok that Communist elements would try to exploit these sentiments to undermine the control of the central government over the Khorat Plateau.

Although the peasant in the northeast tends to relate to the Lao, it seems more realistic to characterize both his cultural identity and loyalty as localism, which is often defined by the village limits. Such attitudes are being discouraged by Thai Government programs such as radio broadcasts which encourage the villager to transcend local orientations and to identify with wider segments of the northeast. As a consequence of these efforts, a sense of regionalism epitomized by the term "isan" is appearing. Isan denotes to the Thai that which is distinctly associated with the northeast, as contrasted to the interests and goals of central Thailand. Isan identity, however, does not necessarily imply rigid distinction between the northeast and central Thailand. The "Thai way" does have certain attractions for the northeast villager, and greater acculturation will probably be achieved through government programs. A growing number of northeasterners are being accepted in Thai society and government service.

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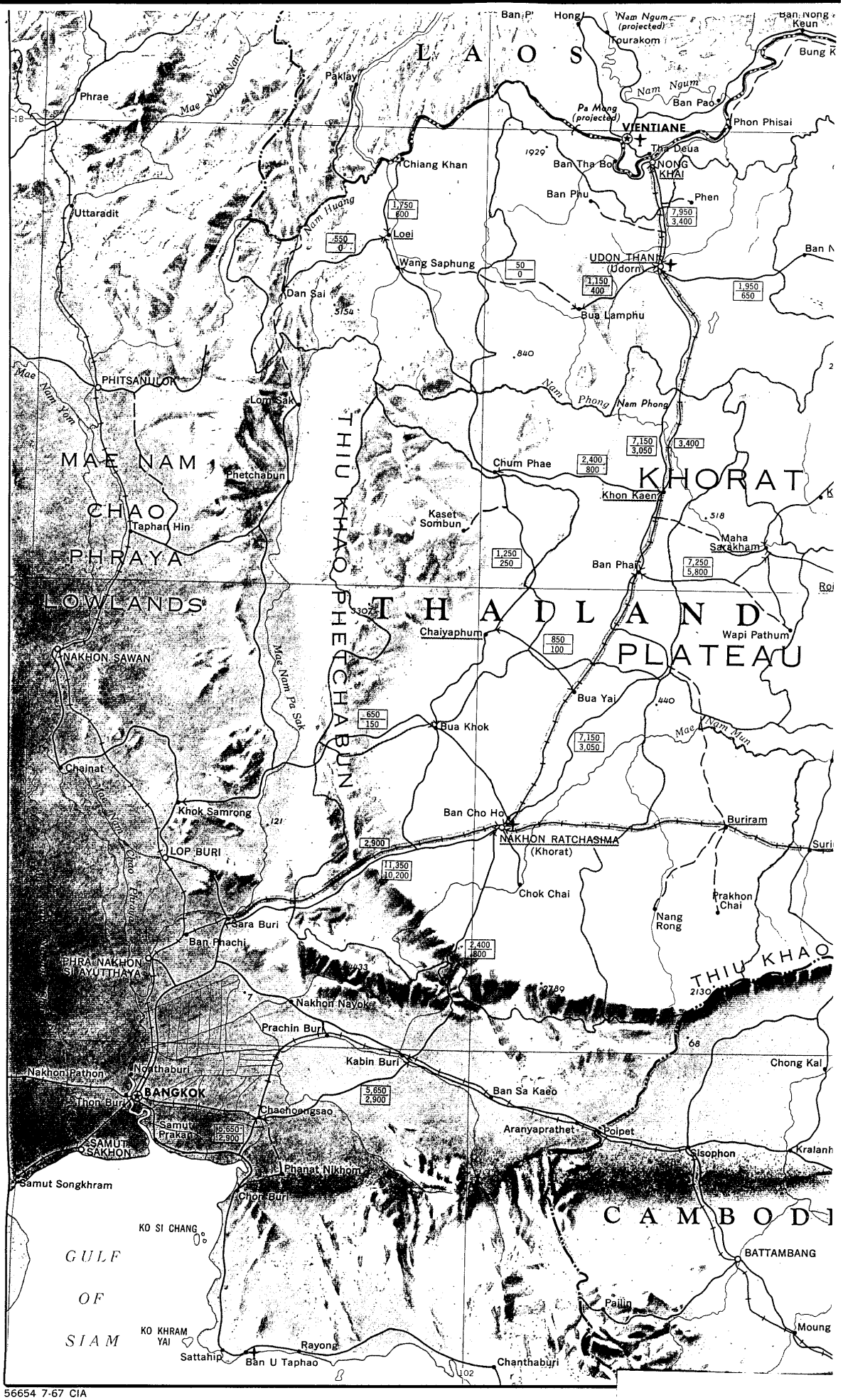


NORTHEAST THAILAND

Road
Road under construction
Railroad
Main line of communication
Province (Changwat) boundary
Roi Et — Province capital
Airfield
Damsite

Maximum road capacity, short tons per day

Dry season 650 / 150 Wet season

(capacity figures apply between brackets)

Maximum railroad capacity, short tons per day

2,900

(capacity figures apply between brackets)

NOTE: Only provinces of the Khorat Plateau are shown. A province has the same name as its capital.

Spot elevations in feet

0 25 50 75 Miles

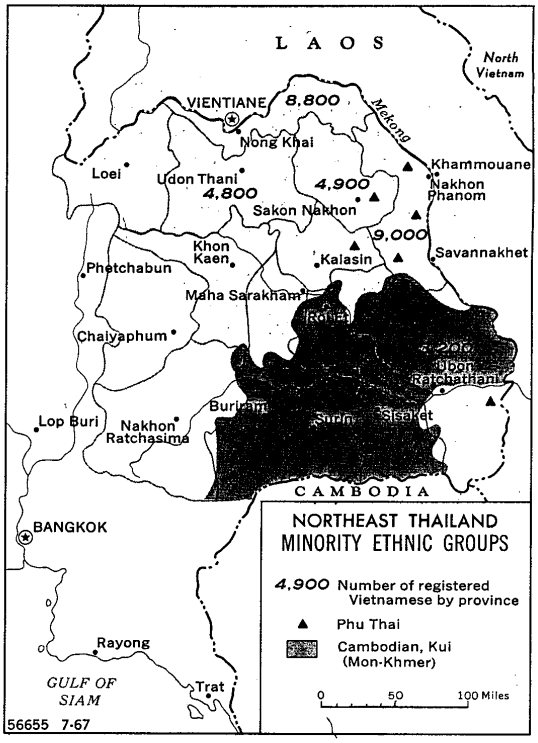
0 25 50 75 Kilometers

0 200 300 Miles

The traditional lack of national identification in northeast Thailand is complicated by the presence of several minority groups. Major minorities and their estimated numbers include the Cambodians (200,000), Kuis (100,000), Phu Thai (100,000), and Vietnamese (35,000). The degree to which these groups have been assimilated into the predominant culture of northeast Thailand varies, but very few of the people identify with Bangkok. Only the Vietnamese are considered to be security problems or disruptive forces, and the central government has registered most of them.

The Cambodians generally retain their own language and to some extent their culture. The Kuis (more commonly known as the Soai) and the Phu Thai, tribal peoples who share in the common pattern of life in the northeast, are very much aware of their distinctive identity. They tend to marry within their own groups and often feel both envy and hostility toward the central Thai.

Of the more than 70,000 Vietnamese estimated to have resided in Thailand before 1959, some 35,000 were repatriated to North Vietnam between 1959 and 1964 by agreement of the two governments. Approximately 40,000 Vietnamese are still in Thailand, and about 30,700 of the estimated 35,000 on the Khorat Plateau are government registered (see Map 56655). The majority are not overtly militant, but they are subject to North Vietnamese influence and are a thorn in the side of Thai security.



Passenger Ferry on Mekong River between Tha Deua, Laos, and Nong Khai, Thailand. It is difficult to distinguish between the Thai and Lao as both are of the Tai ethnic group. The Buddhist monk, left foreground, represents the predominant religion common to Thailand and Laos.

Geo-Economic Factors

The poverty of the area is essentially a rural phenomenon. The average income of the northeastern peasant is only about 60 percent of that prevailing in rural areas elsewhere in the country, whereas the income of the townsman here compares favorably with that in other towns of Thailand. The distribution of income also is uneven among the rural population. Those comprising the uppermost 2 percent of villagers in the northeast are reported to receive 10 times as much cash income per capita as the 78 percent in the lowest income category. Farmers in the latter group average only $15 annual cash income per capita; the inclusion of in-kind income would considerably raise this figure. A United States Operations Mission (USOM) advisor has observed, however, that the villager in northeast Thailand, although poorer than his counterpart in central Thailand, is better off materially than the vast majority of people in many other parts of Asia. A survey of village attitudes in northeast Thailand conducted in the spring of 1966 produced the surprising response that most villagers rated themselves "reasonably well off" rather than "poor."

More than 90 percent of the economically active population derives its livelihood from agriculture, with over 80 percent of the cultivated land in most northeastern provinces devoted to rice production. As in the rest of Thailand, rice is the most important crop, but the yield is poor. In 1966 rice production averaged only 964 pounds per acre in the northeast compared to 1,523 pounds per acre in the central lowlands. Exacerbating the situation is the high nutritional population density (the number of people per square mile of *cultivated* land)—567 in the northeast compared to 463 in the richer agricultural lands of the central lowlands.

The poorer yield of rice in the northeast is explained largely in terms of the natural environment. The bordering escarpment intercepts moisture-bearing winds from the southwest and creates a rainshadow that reduces both the amount and reliability of rainfall. As a consequence most of the plateau receives far less than the accepted minimum of 70 inches annually that is required for the successful growth of rice in tropical Southeast Asia. Irrigation is therefore required for optimum rice cultivation in the northeast. Only 26 percent of the cropland of the region is irrigated, however, as against 61 percent of the cropland in the central lowland. Generally permeable sandy soils and the relatively level terrain of northeast Thailand restrict the number of locations suitable for sizable reservoirs and hinder the design of effective irrigation systems.

Most low-lying land suitable for irrigated paddy rice is already under rice cultivation. This land is located chiefly in the central and southern provinces, along the Mae Nam (River) Mun and Lam Nam (River) Chi and their tributaries, and generally on the lower slopes but above the valley bottoms, which in many cases are subject to severe flooding. The gradients of rivers on the Khorat Plateau are comparatively low (the main river, the Mun, falls only 300 feet in 250 miles), and runoff is slow. Floodwater arrives so suddenly, is so deep, and remains so long that some of the land otherwise best suited to cultivation cannot be used even for "floating rice," a variety commonly grown in deeply flooded areas.

Most of the area devoted to irrigated rice cultivation is located on the so-called "Roi Et" soils, which are generally acid, sandy loams, giving medium yields at best. Chemical fertilizer most often is a cultural innovation and has seldom been used by the peasant. Further, without heavy subsidization, the peasant rarely has the cash to buy the necessary fertilizer; to remedy this situation the government is encouraging the formation of cooperatives which will furnish loans to the peasant at a minimal interest rate. Outside the irrigated areas, the peasant cannot always be assured of a profitable relationship between fertilizer cost and increased rice yield even though he may be gradually accepting the concept of chemical fertilization.

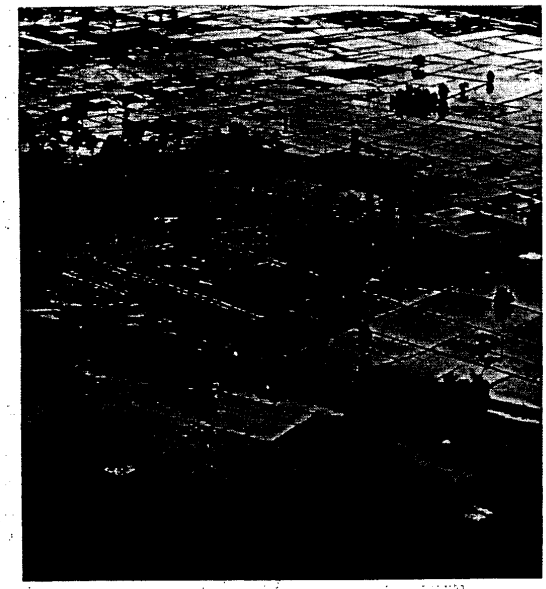
Deterioration of the natural fertility of the soil has caused rice cultivation to be extended to marginal lands. The movement of people away from the most densely settled areas in parts of the Mun and Chi river valleys (as to new lands in northern Thailand) affords evidence that nutritional density in these areas is becoming critical. Although the potential paddy lands in thinly settled provinces along the Mekong River might support greater numbers, a significant redistribution of the population on the Khorat Plateau in the near future appears to be generally unfeasible in view of the limitations of irrigation works planned for early completion. Projected tanks (reservoirs) and dams will result in complete irrigation systems for only some 10 percent of the present cultivated area. Not until the huge, multipurpose Pa Mong dam of the Mekong Project becomes a reality in the more distant future will it be possible to irrigate a substantial part—an estimated 2 million acres or about 22 percent of the present cultivated area—of the Khorat Plateau. Selected proposed and completed Mekong Project dams are shown on Map 56654.

Other than rice, the chief crops grown on the Khorat Plateau are cotton, kenaf (a fiber plant), and maize. These "upland crops" are generally cultivated on higher slopes by peasants practicing a shifting type of agriculture. Slopeland is cleared by cutting and burning the forest, and the crop is fertilized by the residual wood ashes. Plots are normally cultivated for a few years; further use is inhibited by a rapid diminution of yield.

The area suitable for growing upland crops is estimated to be at least twice as large as the area of paddy land. While this shifting cultivation may be acceptable in thinly settled areas where a long period of bush fallow restores fertility, in parts of the central and southern provinces of the northeast the growing population density has progressively shortened the period of natural soil regeneration; as a result, the land is becoming gradually exhausted. An estimated 20 percent of the upland now lies abandoned. The introduction of a system of permanent agriculture to replace shifting agriculture would significantly improve economic conditions in the region.

Future exploitation of mineral resources may help to stimulate the economic growth of the northeast. According to a survey conducted recently by a US Geological Survey team, there are an estimated 78 million tons of copper ore (representing some 660,000 tons of saleable metal) and 27 million tons of iron ore in the province of Loei. Although coking coal resources are lacking, power generated at the planned Mekong Project dam on the Nam (River) Ngum in Laos might permit the use of electric furnaces at a smelter which could be built in the vicinity of Loei. The Khorat Plateau also has one of the world's largest deposits of rock salt; well drillers have encountered layers of salt more than 800 feet thick. The UN Mekong Committee Secretariat is examining the feasibility of establishing a chemical complex, most likely in the province of Chaiyaphum, which could use up to 50,000 tons of salt annually.

Dry paddy ricefields. Termite mounds, front middle-ground, contain more fertile soil than the surrounding paddy. The mounds are truncated and planted to vegetables. Resin, used for torches and for waterproofing boats and baskets, is extracted from the large yang trees in the background. Mound "farming" and extractive activities are evidence of the subsistence farming in which most northeast peasants engage; they produce chiefly for their own needs.



Wet paddy ricefields. Trees are left standing in the fields so that the humus derived from the fallen leaves will enrich the soil, which often tends to be infertile.

Counter-Insurgency Measures

The Thai Government with the advice and aid of various US Government agencies has taken a number of steps designed to strengthen its position in the northeast. Since 1962, civic action programs that stress the improvement of health and educational facilities, well drilling, development of agricultural techniques, and limited road building have been carried on under the aegis of the Mobile Development Units (MDU) in the National Security Command. In 1964 the Accelerated Rural Development (ARD) program was established under the civilian control and guidance of the Committee for Coordination and Operational Planning (CCOP) in an attempt to meet the Communist challenge more effectively. It provides a vehicle for accelerated, sustained followup to MDU area operations and represents a new concept of coordinated and concentrated programing of all rural development efforts in critical areas.

In 1966 the Counter Subversion Operation Command (CSOC), established to coordinate the countersubversion efforts of all Thai Government agencies operating throughout the country, developed the "0910 plan" (name derived from the 1966-67 lunar calendar year 2509–2510). The "0910 plan," commonly known as the "dry season plan" (operations were to be carried out during the winter-spring dry season), abandoned the previously used but generally ineffective large-scale sweeps of suspected insurgent areas by Thai security forces. Instead, it placed 12-man squads and police reinforcements in 250 selected villages, located in 10 priority areas within 7 security-sensitive provinces, with the objective of denying insurgents access to the population and resources. This measure has proved successful in forcing Communist bands to move out of their former strongholds, but as a result they have increased their activities in adjacent areas.

Prospects

The insurgency threat in Thailand is mitigated by major forces for stability that did not prevail in Vietnam, namely, a strong and effective central government, a history of independence of foreign control, a long tradition of reverence for the king and monarchy, almost universal acceptance of Buddhism, and exceptional economic prosperity by Asian standards. It is apparent, however, that these stabilizing forces apply chiefly to central Thailand; a less favorable situation prevails in the rural areas of the northeast. The generally apolitical peasant of the northeast neither commits himself positively to the central government nor shares to any great extent in the benefits of the current prosperity. There appears to be no active widespread disaffection with the government at present, but the Communist cadre, numbering about 1,300 armed insurgents, is attempting to create disaffection through propaganda, often presented at compulsory propaganda sessions in the villages, and through terrorism.

The combined developmental and security programs of the central government constitute a monumental task of social and administrative reform, and one that, if it is to succeed, must persuade the villagers that their aspirations can be better met by the government than by the Communists.

Dense deciduous and evergreen forests on upper slopes of Phu Phan Mountains. These wooded mountains are a core area for much of the insurgent activity in this part of the northeast.